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RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE PRIORITY 1171
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SUBJECT: HOSTAGES AND RAMIFICATIONS ARE COMING HOME TO KOREA

Classified By: AMB. ALEXANDER VERSHBOW. REASONS 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: On August 30, all of the remaining Korean hostages held by their Taliban captors in Afghanistan were turned over to the International Committee of the Red Crescent in Ghazni. Out of the 23 Koreans kidnapped by the Taliban, two were killed, two were released on August 13, and the remaining 19 will now head home in the coming days. According to the acting ROK foreign minister, the ROKG agreement with the Taliban on hostage release included only two conditions: 1) that Korea withdraw its remaining military personnel from Afghanistan by the end of the year, and; (2) that the ROKG prohibit missionary activities by Korean citizens in Afghanistan. ROKG officials deny that a ransom was paid, a claim which most Koreans are skeptical about. Beyond the Taliban, the Korean public places the biggest blame on the church that sent the missionaries to Afghanistan in the first place. They have expressed a mixture of resignation and disappointment at the USG response, but do not blame the United States. The Korean media have given President Roh credit for the way in which he has handled the crisis, but many are also criticizing him for breaking with international principles about negotiating with terrorists. While most consider the outcome the best possible result under the circumstances, they worry that Korean citizens are now more likely to be targeted by others. Meanwhile, Korea's image as a promoter of missionary zeal and its stated commitment to fighting the global war on terror have both been called into question. With four months left in the ROK presidential election campaign, the Roh Administration is hoping that its resolution of the crisis

will benefit the more liberal candidates, but owing to these serious concerns, the accolades are more likely to be short-lived. Implications for the United States include an apparent end to ROK military support in Afghanistan, which was planned in any case. It is also too early to gauge the fallout for the ROK deployment in Iraq, which too will conclude at the end of this year without another mandate from the National Assembly. END SUMMARY.

ALL 19 REMAINING HOSTAGES RELEASED

12. (SBU) After 43 days of being held by their Taliban captors, the remaining 19 Korean missionaries have now been turned over to the International Committee of the Red Crescent in Ghazni and, with U.S. and ISAF assistance, transported to safety in Kabul. Previously, the Taliban had killed two of the male hostages and released two of the females unharmed. After an August 28 agreement was reached with South Korean government negotiators, the Taliban let an additional 12 hostages go on August 29. On August 30, the remaining seven were then set free. They arrived at the U.S.-led Ghazni Provincial Reconstruction Team headquarters that evening. All of the former hostages have been screened for health concerns by Korean medical personnel. According to our contacts at the Ministry of Foreign and Affairs and Trade, none of the released hostages appeared to have any specific medical problems, aside from being generally weakened by their ordeal. The ROKG has made arrangements to return the 21 surviving missionaries to Korea on a commercial airliner via Dubai on August 31. The bodies of the two slain males had previously been returned to Seoul for burial.

THE ROK'S DEAL WITH THE TALIBAN

13. (S) On August 28, following a series of four face-to-face meetings led by ROK National Intelligence Service chief Kim Man-bok, Korean and Taliban negotiators reached an agreement for the release of all remaining 19 hostages. That evening, ROK Blue House spokesman Cheon Ho-seon announced that the agreement was for the release of all the hostages "in return for the pullout of Korean troops within this year and a pledge to stop sending Christian missionaries to the country." Cheon noted that ROK President Roh Moo-hyun had been briefed on the agreement and had instructed ROKG officials to do their best to ensure that all the hostages are released and returned home safely. Cheon also expressed gratitude to the Afghan government, multinational troops stationed in Afghanistan, and international organizations for their support. The Blue House did not mention or thank the U.S. Government.

14. (C) On August 29, Deputy Foreign Minister Shim Yoon-joe assured the Ambassador that the only conditions the ROKG had agreed to for the release of the hostages were:

-- (1) Korea would withdraw its remaining military personnel from Afghanistan by the end of the year, as had already been decided before the hostage crisis; and

-- (2) The ROKG would prohibit missionary activities by Korean citizens in Afghanistan, a step that had already been taken immediately after the hostages were captured.

KOREAN MEDIA REPORTS A U.S. "WINK AND A NOD"

15. (U) All the major ROK television stations interrupted their regularly scheduled programming for the live broadcasting of the August 28 Blue House statement, and for the next three days the on-going resolution of the hostage situation continued to dominate all media outlets. The moderate Hankook Ilbo and the left-leaning Hankyoreh Shinmun reported that the Defense Ministry, in a move to comply with

the first item in the agreement, was preparing to expedite its withdrawal of Korean troops from Afghanistan by the end of this year. On August 29, a senior member of the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff was quoted as saying that Seoul would notify allied nations of its pullout plans next week.

¶6. (U) After initial expressions of joy and relief over the release of the hostages, media commentators began questioning how the ROK had handled the situation, and what additional concessions may have been included in the deal. Responding to criticism that the ROK has broken with international principles about negotiating with terrorists, Hankyoreh Shinmun quoted a ROKG official as saying that direct negotiations had been an inevitable choice, and that the U.S. understood the need for such talks after two of the hostages were killed. The right-of-center JoongAng Ilbo gave credit to U.S. "behind the scenes" support for making a "great contribution to resolving the hostage crisis." Both JoongAng Ilbo and Hankook Ilbo gave prominent play to quotes from an official with the ROK Embassy in Washington who said the U.S. had supported ROKG negotiating efforts, while publicly observing its principle of making no concessions to terrorists. The JoongAng Ilbo singled out CIA Director Michael Hayden (who had previously served with U.S. Forces Korea) as providing behind-the-scenes U.S. support for the ROK's solution to the crisis.

¶7. (U) Polling of an on-line panel of 101 university-educated Koreans who follow international and political news indicated that aside from the Taliban, the majority of Koreans blamed the church that had sent the missionaries to Afghanistan in the first place. A majority also expressed resignation or disappointment at the U.S. response, rather than anti-Americanism, and generally felt the South Korean government had done as well as it could under the circumstances.

POTENTIAL POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS

¶8. (S) The safe return of the hostages to Korea is an obvious victory for President Roh. Other winners include National Intelligence Service chief Kim Man-bok, who led the negotiation, and MOFAT officials who fronted the ROKG effort. At that same time, however, by choosing to negotiate with the Taliban, the South Korean Government has made a bed in which it now must lie. For the following reasons, the accolades being showered upon the Blue House are being tempered with a good deal of criticism.

Was Ransom Paid?

¶9. (S) ROK officials have denied that the deal they struck with the Taliban included the payment of ransom. When asked about it, the Blue House spokesman replied that he could not reveal the "concrete processes" of the negotiation, but that "feasible options" were proposed by the ROKG negotiators. The ROK media remain skeptical and have pressed the government for more details of the agreement. If it is revealed that the ROK government did, in fact, pay a ransom for the hostages' release, it is likely to fuel criticism of the ROKG that their handling of the situation was in contravention of accepted international norms for dealing with terrorists.

ROK Actions Have Damaged Its Reputation in the World

¶10. (S) With four months left in the ROK presidential election campaign, the Roh Administration is hoping that its successful resolution of the hostage crisis will somehow benefit the more liberal candidates. If the comments of leading members of both the ruling and opposition parties are a guide, this hope may be in vain. The opposition GNP has been critical of Roh's decision to negotiate with the terrorists, while at a dinner the Ambassador hosted on August

28 for CODEL Watson, even some ruling party members joined in that criticism. Many Korean conservatives and nationalists will also bemoan the fact that South Korea has gone soft, arguing that under past conservative governments the ROK would have dealt with the situation more forcefully and in better coordination with its trusted American ally.

¶11. (S) Outside of the political debate, Korean security experts have expressed serious, and probably well-placed concern, that Korean citizens will now be seen as "walking ATMs" for others throughout the world seeking to make money by kidnapping them. Those soberly assessing the ROK deal with the Taliban must also be concerned that the Taliban will only be encouraged (and perhaps now better financed) to make

other innocent civilians suffer for their extremist cause. Other commentators have pointed out that by electing to negotiate with terrorists, the ROK has severely damaged its reputation in the world, for it has broken with an important well-established and principled policy of the international community.

¶12. (S) Since the hostage crisis began, South Korean society as a whole has also been closely examining and questioning its image as a country known for its missionary zeal. The ROK has a great many Christian missionaries and politically powerful churches that will not respond well to the ROK Government's decision to ban their members from going to Afghanistan. While they may lie low for a while, they will no doubt forcefully argue that the government cannot dictate to religious workers where they may go in the world to proselytize.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

¶13. (S) The most immediate and important implication for the United States is that ROK military support for Operation Enduring Freedom appears to be coming to an end. This harrowing experience for the ROKG also will not make its upcoming decision on whether to extend its military dispatch to Iraq any easier.

Waning Support For Operation Enduring Freedom

¶14. (S) In the wake of the hostage crisis, no one in the ROK Government is likely to oppose the ROKG decision to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year, if not sooner. That decision appears to be irreversible. Second, while MOFAT has been quick to assure us they will still give every consideration to the plan of replacing their military medical and engineering units in Bagram and Parawan with commensurate civilian personnel, that too is now likely to be a far more difficult domestic political sell.

A Poor Example in the Global War on Terror

¶15. (S) Finally, President Roh's decision to strike a deal with the Taliban, even if no ransom was paid or other troubling concessions made, clearly undermines South Korea's credibility in the eyes of the world as a reliable partner in the global war on terror. Nothing that Korea has done should be interpreted as lessening in any way the desire of the average Korean citizen, or average government official, to see terrorism eradicated from the face of the earth. But in the wake of its decision to make a deal with terrorists, the ROK must now live with the fact that its actions have spoken louder than its words.

¶16. (S) EMBASSY COMMENT: In domestic political terms, the safe return of the 21 hostages is a clear net plus for the Roh Administration. The fact that this did not become an anti-U.S. issue in Korea, and the helpful spin about U.S. assistance in the mainstream media, indicates that we too have fared well. In that sense, this outcome does appear to

have been the best result that could have been achieved under the circumstances. Nonetheless, it is troubling that our ally was so unwilling to attempt to rescue its citizens or retaliate against the Taliban, but was willing to lobby for the release of terrorist prisoners and perhaps even pay ransom to terrorists. There are some early indications the ROK may now be looking to "make it up to the U.S." by giving favorable consideration to extending its presence in Iraq for another year. After allowing for a few days during which the hostages are returned to Korea, we will certainly explore that possibility. At the end of the day, while we recognize that President Roh had very tough choices to make, his credibility as a partner in the global war on terror has been undermined. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW